**How to Write a Children’s Story**

Books for young children are usually short. Young children themselves are usually short. This leads to an assumption that children have small brains and that writing for them is easy. The reverse it true. Young children have large, active brains, and writing for them is enormously difficult. It is even more difficult than writing for adults since only the best is good enough for children—the best words in the best places, and the best characters in the best stories.

Before we begin it is useful to familiarise ourselves with books which are on sale and are currently adored by children. If we do not, we might find ourselves writing books similar to those we ourselves read long ago when we were children, most of which are now out-dated, out-moded and entirely forgotten. It is also extremely useful to read and re-read the books which have passed the test of time—books which remain popular today, fifty, twenty, ten and even five years after they were published. These are classics and they have much to teach us. It is also useful to recall the stories and folktales we listened to and loved as children, the stories which we have remembered into adulthood. What do these classic stories have which other books lack?

**A good picture book for the young child has most of these qualities:**

* Trouble
* One of two themes: ‘the stranger comes to town’ or: ‘the quest.’
* Characters whom readers care about deeply
* A universal theme that speaks to any child, anywhere in the world
* Perfect words in perfect places
* The delight of happiness
* No preaching
* Subtle signposts to living in a social world
* An impact that affects the heart of the reader or listener
* Strange, original, or unexpected use of language
* A complex story that requires the mind to be attentive to detail, to be active in problem-solving, to roll through tunnels of prediction and meaning-making, and to tumble down hills of emotion and up again
* Or for very young children, an original pattern created by rhyme, rhythm or repetition

To find an event that could be a good basis for a story it might be useful to write down, or tell a friend, or other people in a writing group, about a strong emotional experience remembered from childhood, and start writing with that event in mind. This way, the first draft will not be drawn entirely from the imagination, which will mean getting off to a good, heart-felt beginning.

For instance, here’s an anecdote from Tanzania. It’s a true story which was later given more shape and definition to make it a story suitable for publication. Both examples appear below:

**Anecdote:**

When I was a little kid my parents went away to the city to work and I stayed with my grandparents in their village. One day we went off to visit my auntie who lived in a village about three kilometres away. The path to my aunt’s village was very sandy and the grass was so high it curved over the path.

My grandfather led the way, then came my grandmother, then me. We set off.

After a while I smelt something. I thought the smell would go away as we walked past—whatever it was, but it didn’t. I didn’t like it. It made me scared. I told my grandfather I could smell something that was scaring me and I asked him if I could walk between him and grandma. “Of course,” he said.  
So I moved into the middle and we went on. But I could still smell whatever it was and I was still scared. I tried to be calm but in the end I told my grandfather that I was really scared. “What are you so scared of?” he said. “I think there’s a lion following us,” I said. We all turned round and sure enough on the narrow path behind my grandmother was a lion.

My grandfather stood in front of the lion and looked into his eyes and gestured with his arms said quite firmly: “Go away! You’re frightening my grand-daughter. Be off with you!” And the lion turned and walked away. It was incredible! I’ll never forget it.

**Story for publication:**

Rosie was a little girl who lived in a village with her grandmother and her grandfather because her parents had to work far away in the city. Rosie loved her grandmother very much but she loved her grandfather even more.

One day her grandparents decided to visit Rosie’s auntie who lived in a village about an hour’s walk away. They set off. The track to the auntie’s village was soft, and sandy, and narrow. On either side of the path the grass was so high it curled over, like a cool green roof.

Grandfather led the way, next came Grandmother, and last of all, little Rosie. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air was calm. The world was full of peace.

After a while Rosie thought she could smell something she didn’t like. She hoped it would go away. Her heart beat fast. She was scared.

But on they walked. They walked, and they walked, and they walked. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air *seemed* calm. The world *seemed* full of peace.

But still the smell remained. Rosie’s heart beat faster. She was scared. Really scared.

“Grandfather,” she said, “I’m scared. Please can I walk in the middle, between you and Grandmother?”

“Of course,” he said.

So Rosie moved into the middle between her grandmother and her grandfather and they walked, and they walked, and they walked. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air *seemed* calm. The world *seemed* full of peace.

But still the smell remained. Rosie’s heart beat faster. She was scared. Really scared. Really, really scared.

Finally she said, “Grandfather, I’m really frightened.”

“What is it that frightens you, little one?” asked her grandfather kindly.  
“I think there’s a lion following us,” she said.

They all turned around. It was true! Behind Grandmother was a lion, following after them along the narrow path.

Grandfather stood in front of the lion and looked into his eyes. He pointed down the path and said quite firmly: “Lion! Go away! You’re frightening my grand-daughter. Be off with you!”

And the lion turned tail and walked away.

Which only goes to show that lions, like men, understand Swahili!

We need to understand the nature of children’s interests and their emotional needs. We need to know the difference between their literary needs and their literacy needs, and to be able to fulfil both those needs at the same time.

It is useful also to know what kinds of ideas might challenge their thinking, based on the society they live in at the start of the third millennium. It is polite to consider the ethnic group they belong to, which gender they are and which religion they adhere to, if any. When we write we will not necessarily be hide-bound by all this information since that might cause us to self-censor too much, which might in turn lead to write seriously bad, banal stories which bore kids to death. Having said that, we should be as open-minded as possible. We need to be able to share ideas across cultures, after all, to avoid indoctrination in one direction or the other. Access to different kinds of information is important to individual development and to our understanding of other communities.

So although we have to pay attention to religion, ethnic group and gender to target specific groups, we mustn’t let this destroy our artistic goals. Questions such as: ‘Will my reader be offended?’ should not constrain us, in the end, nor limit our creativity. We might wish to write about another religion, ethnic group, or gender in such a way as to provide enriching and surprising elements for our readers, allowing them to become open to new ideas and other people’s perceptions of the world.

For example, at the beginning of the 21st century we need to consider gender stereo-typing. Is it any longer appropriate to have the females in the story only in the house, the kitchen, and the garden, and caring for the family? Might it not be possible to make the main character a female a - bold, exciting, brave, decision-making female, who has adventures and wins through, in spite of adversity? This would provide excellent role-models for today’s girls.

Any stereo-typing should be avoided, such as making children who wear glasses into weaklings who are brainy but hate sport; or old people being made doddery and incapable of caring for themselves; or disabled people being pitied for what they can’t do, instead of being celebrated for what they can do; or people of a certain race or religion being mocked for who they are and what they believe.

Of course we need to consider the maintenance of the solid cultural values which underpin the society in which we live and write. Sensitivity and respect are essential. Acknowledging this sensitivity without falling into the trap of stereotyping is a difficult balancing act, to which much thought should be given.

Finally we have to keep in mind the fact that adults will do the buying and reading of the books we write. The words will be channelled through an adult reading aloud to a child. Pleasing the adult is certainly important and must not be forgotten, but the child is more important and must never be forgotten.

At the start of a story we need to be as direct as possible. It’s a common sin to beat about the bush, and waffle on for too long. We should attempt to say who, when, and where in the first two sentences, and then begin to state the problem. We have to solve a problem during a story otherwise we have no trouble. Without trouble we have no plot. Only trouble is interesting.

For instance, if the main character is not stopped from achieving his or her goal, the story is boring. If a child has lost her mother and goes to find her she could come up against difficulties and again and again and not find her mother until the very end of the story. We need to feel some anxiety for the main character in order for a story to work.

The most important quality in writers is the ability to be dissatisfied with what we have written. Dissatisfaction creates the essential discomfort that will eventually lead us back to the manuscript to attempt yet again to craft our work to perfection. The least effective writers are the most immediately satisfied writers. They do not understand the need for dissatisfaction nor do they know what to be dissatisfied about.

So how do we know when something is not right in writing? Here is a revision of some of the elements about which we need to be vigilant and dissatisfied as writers:

Only trouble is interesting; and character is everything. **If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**

‘…Stories that begin in character and conflict are bound to be more interesting than stories that do not’ (Gardner, John. On Becoming A Novelist. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. p.55) ***If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.***

*‘Many powerful stories are based on the thwarting of a main character’s deepest needs and yearnings.’(Ruler, R. and Wheeler, S.* Creating The Story. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993. p.20) ***If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.***

*‘In nearly all good fiction the basic—and all but inescapable—plot form is: A central character wants something, goes after it despite opposition (perhaps including his own doubts) and so arrives at a win, lose or draw.’ (Gardner, p.54)* ***If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.***

*‘The difference between the right word and the wrong word is the same as the difference between lighting and a lightning bug.’  
Mark Twain* ***If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.***

Show character and plot through speech and action: do not tell.**If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**

Good writing has been re-written. **If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**

Good writing is full of surprises. For example:  
‘The sight of him … rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day …’ **If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**

Good writing is totally correct. **If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**

Good writing adds to our quality of life by revealing life to us.  
**And if this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.**